DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 347 CG 014 066

AUTHOR Wiggers, T. Thorne
TITLE Human Nonverbal Behaviors, Empathy, and Film.
PUB DATE 2 Sep 79
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (87th, New York, NY, September 1-5, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audiences; Behavior Patterns; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Emotional Experience; *Empathy; *Films; Identification (Psychological); *Nonverbal Communication; Reactive Behavior; Stimulus Behavior; *Visual Stimuli

ABSTRACT

Nonverbal behavior is an important aspect of the film and is one of the several tools that a director uses to communicate to an audience the characters' feelings and relationships. By adding to this information their own personal responses, viewers often experience strong feelings. With reference to the social psychological research of nonverbal behavior three categories are described: kinesics, prozemics, and paralanguage. Examples which define these categories and demonstrate their importance are offered, through descriptions of scenes from several films and discussions of two filmclips from "Julia" (1977). Eye contact, personal space and voice quality serve to create emotional moods for the viewer as well as for the performers. (Author/CKJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED181347

Human Nonverbal Behaviors, Empathy, and Film

T. Thorne Wiggers

Gettysburg College

Presented For The Symposium

The Non-Verbal Communication of Empathy in Film

Robert H. Rossberg, Chair

American Psychological Association Meeting

New York City

September 2, 1979

CG 014066

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

T. Thorne Wiggers

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG 014066

ABSTRACT

Human Nonverbal Behaviors, Empathy, and Film

T. Thorne Wiggers

American Psychological Association Meeting

September 2, 1979

Nonverbal behavior is an important aspect of the film. It is one of the several tools that a director uses to communicate to an audience the characters' feelings and relationships. By adding to this information, their own personal responses, viewers often experience strong feelings. With reference to the social psychological research of nonverbal behavior three categories are described, kinesics, proxemics, and paralanguage. To define these categories and to demonstrate their importance, examples are given using descriptions of several film scenes and discussions of two film clips from Julia (1977).

Human Nonverbal Behaviors, Empathy, and Film

Seated in a darkened theatre, the audience's attention is focused forward on a screen where a series of photographic images are shown in rapid succession. Munsterberg (1916) believed that the mind, watching these lifeless images, uses its imagination and memory to create the illusion of movement. Emotions are similarly created: viewers respond empathically, based on the bits of information they have about the characters' situation, relationships, and feelings.

As JoAnn Feldstein (1979) pointed out, the affective components of empathy occur when the viewer experiences the emotions of the film characters "as if" they were his/her own. Cognative empathy occurs when the audience puts together its knowledge about the situation and the emotions involved creating feelings which are not necessarily congruent with those expressed on the screen. The audience's empathic experience is usually a combination of these cognative and affective elements.

The nonverbal behavior of film actors is one of the several tools which the director uses to communicate to the audience the situation, characters' feelings, and their relationships. Adding to this knowledge their own experience

and imagination, viewers have empathic responses. As the illusion of movement is created out of the rapid succession of individual frames, emotional responses are in part created in the mind from the bits of nonverbal behavior.

Since the film making and editing process carefully select the nonverbal behaviors presented, their effect is powerful. Their potency is increased further since they are carefully portrayed (almost to the point of being stereotyped) and since they are inescapeably presented throughout the visual medium. Each shot is selected for its visual content so expressions of emotion shown on a screen are stronger than those found in real life or those projected across the footlights of a stage. If you have seen a Bergman film like The Seventh Seal (1956), Winter Light (1962), or Cries and Whispers (1972), you may have experienced the emotional power that a selection of images can create.

Since Gerry Gladstein (1979) will be discussing this selection and amplification process in the next paper, my goal will be to define for you the nonverbal categories of kinesics, proxemics, and paralanguage, relating their use in the cinema to social psychological theory and the research of nonverbal communication. Using the two scenes from Julia (1977) and my descriptions of several other scenes, I want

to show you how behaviors from each category are used by directors to present and create emotions. For the sake of simplicity I will review each of these categories individually; however, it is important to realize that each behavior and category of behavior does not exist alone. It is the gestalt that the director presents which creates emotional response.

Kinesic behavior encompasses all body movements (Knapp, 1972). It includes such obvious behaviors as the movement of hands, arms, legs, and torso. Less obviously classified as kinesic are facial expressions and eye behavior. In the segments of Julia which you just saw, Jane Fonda's grimance as she drank some of the brown liquid from the jelly jar glass and her posture as she walked toward the emigration agent are classified as kinesic movements.

Because facial expressions clearly communicate emotions, kinesic behavior is a crucial aspect of film. The research of Ekman and Friesen (Ekman, 1973; Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Ekman, Friesen, & Ellsworth, 1972) has found that across cultures there are pan cultural, genetically programmed facial responses for six primary emotions: fear, surprise, sadness, happiness, anger, and disgust. When an individual experiences two or more

emotions at the same time, the affect display may be a blending of the facial displays. For instance, Fonda's grimance (a disgust response) blends with her sadness in the first scene.

In their research of literate and pre-literate cultures, Ekman and Friesen (1969, 1975) found that people can identify accurately the emotions portrayed on photographs of affect displays. This has direct application to the film viewer. When a scene is occurring, the viewer may not be consciously thinking about what the affect display means, even though he/she would probably be able to identify it if the film were stopped. Even so this unconscious information is used by the viewer cognatively and affectively.

One of the best examples, I have seen, of the use of facial expressions in film is in China Syndrome (1979). Throughout, especially during the suspenseful moments, the camera focused on the actors' faces. As a result, it was impossible to avoid recognizing cognatively and experiencing affectively the same anxiety and tension that the actors were portraying.

In the book Unmasking the Face, Ekman and Friesen (1975) describe the specific facial configurations which make up the primary emotions. Using this model it is easy to analyze

Fonda's expression during the first film clip we showed you. Her face predominately portrays the emotion of sadness. It has lost most of its muscle tone. The upper eye lids sag as the lower lids are pulled slightly up and as the inside corners of her eye brows are raised. Most of the time her gaze is directed downward. As she experiences other emotions they are blended with the sadness. When she drinks from the glass, she expresses disgust; her nose wrinkles as her cheeks and lips are raised.

When Gerry, JoAnn, and I were watching this segment using a film analyzer, we were surprised to see an affect display which lasted only 3 or 4 frames. (Ekman and Friesen (1975) believe that many affect displays last for only a micro second.) Just before Fonda kicks the waste basket, she smiles. Her smile can be interpreted as her deciding to get even with that wretched paper. While this expression is not consciously visible, its tachistoscopic presentation may have an unconscious effect upon the audience's empathy.

The work of Birdwhistell (1970) and Scheflen (1965, 1972, 1973) describes how a combination of kinesic movements define and maintain relationships and social order. They show how the enacting of various behaviors called reciprocals, determines who in a relationship will be dominant and who will be submissive. They also show how people indicate to others that they are attracted to them. Scheflen (1965)

described in detail a set of acts, which are predominately kinesic, calling them courtship and quasi-courtship rituals. Mehrabian (1971, 1972; Mehrabian & Ksionzky, 1972) in his research of waiting strangers, has found that similar non-verbal behaviors are related to affiliation and status.

As I watch films, I notice that the same kinesic movements that have been identified by these social scientists are used by actors and directors to define relationships and situations. One of the best examples I have seen of courtship behavior occurs in the film Inspiration (1931) which stars Greta Garbo and Robert Montgomery. The film opens with Garbo and Montgomery looking out on a dance floor from separate platforms which are across the room from one another. As they watch the dancers, they start to exchange glances of increasing length. Montgomery straightens his tie and coat in what Scheflen defines as a preening gesture. He expresses "courtship readiness" when he straightens his posture. Garbo, however, remains relaxed. (Mehrabian (1971, 1972) related relaxation to higher status.) She asserts her dominance by looking at Montgomery longer than he is able to look at her without averting his gaze. Finally Garbo moves from her platform to Montgomery's. Without dialogue, the scene has been set and Garbo and Montgomery's relationship has been defined. The audience has no difficulty in empathizing with this relationship.

In the border scene from Julia (1977) a group of reciprocals occurs defining the relationship between Lilly and the agent. Throughout the scene, the agent maintains a relaxed position staring dominatingly at Lilly. As he stares at her, she looks at him briefly, then averts her gaze downward in a submissive fashion. In an attempt to change the relationship to one more relaxed and informal, Lilly uses quasi-courtship behaviors as defined by Scheflen (1965) and affiliative behaviors as defined by Mehrabian (1971, 1972). She frequently nods her head, smiles, and laughs.

In these two examples I have commented on the use of eye contact. Argyle and Cook (1976) have conducted significant research in this area. They have found, as we saw in Julia and in Inspiration, that eye gaze can have a threatening meaning or it can indicate the desire to get to know someone better. Interpreting this behavior depends on the situation and on other nonverbal cues. The film Dracula (1979) showed me how both the threat and interest displays could exist in the same gaze. When Dracula stares at Lucy, he communicates both a sexual interest and the desire to destroy her. His look is intense, he doesn't even blink. Initially his expression is menancing, then he smiles seductively changing the meaning of his stare.

The second category that I want to consider is proxemics.

Directors commonly use this nonverbal behavior as a way to define the relationships of various actors. Hall (1956) coined the word, proxemics, to refer to peoples' use of social and personal space. He noted that the informal space surrounding an individual expands and contracts depending on the type of encounter, the relationship of the communicating persons, their personalities, and the culture. He classified this expanding and contracting space into four categories: intimate, casual-personal, social-consultative, and public. Intimate distances range from actual physical contact to about eighteen inches, casual-personal distances range from one and a half feet to four feet, social-consultative (that is space used primarily for conducting business) ranges from four to twelve feet, while public distance covers the area from twelve feet to the limits of visibility or hearing.

Analyzing further the Garbo/Montgomery scene that I described before, it is possible to see how a change in spacial orientation implies and causes a change in relationship. By moving to Montgomery's platform overlooking the dance, Garbo takes the initiative (changing their distance from public to casual-personal). Since there had been no introduction or conversation to establish the appropriateness of this distance, we immediately recognize and empathize with Montgomery's discomfort. Pushing herself even further into

Montgomery's territory, Garbo pulls out a cigarette and holds it close to indicate to him that she would like a light. When his hand shakes with the lighter, she steadies his arm holding it with her hand, thus entering his intimate space.

In the scenes from Julia the film's director uses proxemics to show Lilly's relationship to the border agent, to provide some information about her fellow traveling companions, and to show her problems with her work. Lilly's movement away from the typewriter underscores what we already know about her frustration with her writing. The fact that the two women traveling with her arrange it so one of them is in front of her and other behind adds to the audience's growing hypothesis that they were sent by Julia to protect her. The location of the custom agent's desk, his sitting while Lilly is required to stand, and the distance between them accentuates the awkward interaction that occurs and helps the audience empathize with Lilly.

With the development of the talking picture, directors were able to take advantage of the verbal channel of communication. This channel includes both the verbal content of the message and the paralanguage. Paralanguage is composed of sounds (or silence) that surround the words that are used. Trager (1958) identified four components of paralanguage:

1.) Voice quality, i.e., pitch, rhythm, resonance, and tempo; 2.) Vocal characteristics like laughing, crying, yelling, moaning, sneezing, and coughing; 3.) Voice quality, which included characteristics of intensity and pitch height (overhigh or overlow); and 4.) Vocal segregates for instance "uh," "um," "uh-huh," and silent pauses. To Trager's paralinguistic categories Knapp (1972) adds some of the extralinguistic phenomena defined by Mahl and Schultze (1964). These additions include dialect or accent, speech rate, latency of response, and speech disturbances. Speech disturbances include studders, sentence changes, repetition of words, and some of the vocal segregates defined by Trager. In his work with psychotherapy patients Mahl (1956, 1961) found significant relationships between a ratio of speech disturbances to quantity of speech and anxiety.

While Davitz (1964) believes that the paralinguistic literature indicates that emotional meanings can be communicated by vocal expression, other authors question whether they can be judged accurately (Knapp, 1972; Starkweather, 1961). While such a contraversy is relevant for real life situations, it is not in the consideration of paralanguage in the film. If the paralanguage does not communicate the emotion or effect that the director wants, she/he can retake

the shot or edit it out completely. Each sound, movement, and shot is selected for its meaning and effect; as a result one can assume that for well done films the paralinguistic elements have been included to have emotional significance.

Fonda's voice as she speaks with the border agent indicates that she is scared. It is high pitched, soft, and strained with an irregular rhythm. Another clue to her anxiety is the number of speech disturbances which are high relative to the small amount she speaks.

Horror films rely heavily on paralanguage. Would the shower scene in Psycho (1960) be as powerful if there were no scream? How could you ever have a successful monster without it uttering paralinguistic sounds?

Through examples like these and the clips from Julia, I hope I have been able to show you how nonverbal behavior is used in film to communicate to the audience information about relationships and feelings. This knowledge leads to the audience's empathic experience of the film. It is surprising to me that the two scenes that we showed you lasted less than two and a half minutes! During this brief period, there are numerous nonverbal behaviors which communicate an incredible quantity of information and create empathy.

Using artifactual, meditational, and contextual codes which Gerry Gladstein (1979) will describe in the next presentation, directors present this nonverbal information trying to create feelings which are either congruent with those of the film characters or ones that are planned to be different.

References

Argyle, M. & Cook. M. Gaze and mutual gaze. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Birdwhistell, R. L. Kinesics and context. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970.

Davitz, J. R. The communication of emotional meaning. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1964.

Ekman, P. (Ed.). Darwin and facial expression. New York: Academic Press, 1973.

Ekman, P,. & Friesen, W. V. The repetoire of nonverbal behavior: Categories, origins, usage, and coding. Semiontica, 169, 1, 49-98.

Ekman, P. & Friesen, W. V. Unmasking the face. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.

Ekman, P., Friesen, W. V., & Ellsworth, P. Emotion in the human face: Guidelines for research and integration of findings. New York: Pergamon Press, 1972.

Feldstein, J. A. Mental processes, empathy, and film. In R. Rossberg (Chair), The non-verbal communication of empathy in film. Symposium presented at the meeting of The American Psychological Association, New York, 1979.

Gladstein, G. A. Non-performance methods, empathy, and film. In R. Rossberg (Chair), The non-verbal communication of empathy in film. Symposium presented at the meeting of The American Psychological Association, New York, 1979.

Hall, E. T. The hidden dimension. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966.

Knapp, M. L. Nonverbal communication in human interaction. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1972.

Mahl, G. F. Disturbances and silences in the patient's speech in psychotherapy. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 1956, 53, 1-15.

Mahl, G. F. Measures of two expressive aspects of a patient's speech in two psychotherapeutic interviews. In L. A. Gottschalk (Ed.) Comparative psycholinguistic analysis of two psychotherapeutic interviews. New York: International Universities Press, 1961.

Mahl, G. F. & Schulze, G. Psychological research in the extralinguistic area. In T. Sebeck, A. S. Hayes, and M. C. Bateson (Eds.), Approaches to semiotics. The Hague: Mouton, 1964.

Mehrabian, A. Nonverbal communication. Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972.

Mehrabian, A. Verbal and nonverbal interaction of strangers in a waiting situation. Journal of Experimental Research in Personality, 1971, 5, 127-138.

Mehrabian, A., & Ksionzky, S. Some determiners of social interaction. Sociometry, 1972, 35, 588-609.

Munsterberg, H. The photoplay: A psychological study. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1916.

Scheflen, A. E. Body language and social order: Communication as a behavioral control. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: 1972.

Scheflen, A. E. How behavior means. New York: Gordon and Breach, 1973.

Scheflen, A. E. Quasi-courtship behavior in psychotherapy. Psychiatry, 1965, 28, 245-257.

Starkweather, J. A. Vocal communication of personality and human feelings. Journal of Communication, 1961, 11, 63-72.

Trager, G. I. Paralanguage: A first approximation. Studies in linguistics, 1958, 13, 1-12.